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Intercultural Hermeneutics: A Word of Introduction

Abstract

This paper introduces the theme of intercultural hermeneutics for the Advanced Research Programs interdisciplinary colloquium. By focusing on recent literature in the field of intercultural hermeneutics, this paper distinguishes this field of study from traditional cross-cultural communication and indicates its relevance to the current field of biblical studies and missiology. The importance of postcolonial studies to the field of intercultural hermeneutics is also addressed.

Keywords: intercultural hermeneutics, postcolonialism, biblical studies, missiology

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Intercultural Hermeneutics in a Globalizing World

To deal with culture in relation to hermeneutics (or the science of interpretation), we have to approach that complex whole we call culture from a particular angle, namely the semiotic understanding of culture. The semiotics of culture studies culture "as a communication structure and process" and focuses on signs (Greek *semeia*) through which messages are communicated using particular cultural codes.[1]

In Christian theological circles, we take hermeneutics as a reference to biblical and theological interpretations. By adding "intercultural," we specify the interpretive context to be an intercultural setting and an intercultural study. Can biblical and theological interpretations be done interculturally? If so, how? What biblical and theological parameters should be used in intercultural hermeneutics? We can also ask similar questions from the cultural angle. How do we interpret culture from a biblical-theological viewpoint? What can theological and biblical lenses provide to the study of cultures? To relate the two, we may ask, "Are interpretations ever immune from culture? Can there be a supra-cultural understanding or interpretation of the Bible? How best do we deal with cultural realities and biases in our interpretations of scriptures?" I raise these questions as challenges to stimulate further research explorations.

From a semiotic approach to culture, the concern is on communicative interpretation. Any form of communication has to deal with meaning, and meaning is something intended to be shared between a communicator and a recipient (interlocutors) in the process of the communication. At the most basic level, common understanding or meaning is sought in communication by bridging cultural codes. Communication across cultural boundaries is more complex than it first appears. If meaning acquired by individuals is explicable, meanings acquired by communities within their cultural context can be much more complex. What communities understand and what significance such meaning-production has across cultural groups is quite difficult to ascertain.

In the history of Christian missions, we have seen the outcomes of missionary communications of the Christian message bearing more meanings and significance than may have been intended or expected originally. Various examples can be cited both of positive and negative significances. In missiological circles, we have heard of numerous negative examples of unintended cross-cultural meanings in communications. I love the story of the initial reactions of my own Mizo people to the Christian message they first heard about 130 years ago. The missionary, who came out of the evangelical movement for whom redemption of human sinners by

the blood of Jesus Christ was so central in his Christian life, preached about "being saved through the blood of Jesus." The people were amazed to hear about "the kind of magic there was in such blood."[2] The missionary was quick to learn that he had to change his message.

There are also positive unexpected outcomes of cross-cultural communication in the history of missions and global Christianity. The role of the vernacularization of Christianity through Bible translation is particularly significant. As Kwame Bediako has rightly observed, "the emergence of Christian Africa" today is "a surprise story of the modern missionary movement" as a result of its "vernacular achievement," which provided Africans with "the means to make their own needs and categories of meaning."[3] After the period of missionary crisis, when the entire enterprise of modern world mission was shaken, who could have foreseen the shifting center of gravity to the global South of today? When many western missionaries were retreating with a sense of guilt and the number of missionaries was decreasing rapidly in the middle of the twentieth century, who could have predicted the spiritual vigor of Christians in Africa, Latin America, and some parts of Asia we are now seeing? Could anyone have foreseen what is going on in China some seventy years ago when all the missionaries were expelled from that country? We see the great works of the Holy Spirit in all these events, but we also admit the joyful surprises in the communication of the Gospel in our history. The Christian message communicated cross-culturally seems to have had more impact than expected by the communicators, and such impact came about in ways not expected or intended.

In the past, interest in cross-cultural communication has centered on how to bridge the cultural chasm between the communicator and the recipient of the communication. Cultural differences are seen to have played major factors in the understandings as well as misunderstandings of intended meanings. Among the oft-cited examples of cross-cultural miscommunication is the story of a stained glass window of the Catholic Cathedral in Kyoto, Japan. When the Cathedral was built in the 1950s, one of the stained windows depicted St. George killing a dragon. In narrating this example, Robert Schreiter wrote that the incident "caused an uproar." If the dragon symbolized "evil" for westerners, in Japan it is a symbol of the emperor. To have St. George killing the dragon greatly demeaned Japanese cultural identity and is tantamount to destroying the "Japaneseness" of Christianity.[4]

In the age of globalization, which is characterized among others by "too much information" of everything, the world community has supposedly overcome such cultural chasms; and thus, it would be reasonable to expect the

riddance of such cross-cultural misunderstandings. If unity is understood in terms of interconnectedness, the world has never been as unified as today. Yet, the world is vehemently divided too. Our world is now compressed and our consciousness of the wholeness of the world has intensified tremendously.[5] It is a simple truism to say that in no period in history has the human community possessed better communication systems than we have today.

The globalization phenomenon of today has brought the different human communities face to face, so to speak. Massive migrations of people have brought people of different cultures into close physical proximity. For westerners, it is no longer necessary to travel far to learn another culture or language; they are available right in our "backyard." Electronic communication superhighways have brought people in far off lands to close virtual proximity, and the great jumbo jets have made every part of the world physically reachable with ease. "Nowhere in the world is more than thirty hours from where you presently sit,"[6] said some global observers.

But, globalization has also brought great awareness that we do not always share the same values and that we differ greatly in our ways of life even as we also learn from each other every day. Furthermore, the closing of proximity among people of different cultures through globalization has also spurred a new hypersensitivity largely controlled by the politics of identity. Thus, the call for a healthy intercultural hermeneutics is increasingly urgent.

Cross-cultural communication has become a part of our everyday life as we transcend our cultural differences through our everyday communications. While such a necessity to communicate across cultural boundaries as a part of our everyday life is a great achievement, bad cross-cultural communications seem to have hurt many cultural feelings too. In one sense, many of the current global terrorist threats have risen largely from such bad cross-cultural communication. One wonders if better practices of cross-cultural communication and the consequent healthier intercultural understanding among communities would help prevent what we now call "homegrown terrorism" arising from newer immigrant communities.

Approaches to Intercultural Hermeneutics

How has intercultural hermeneutics been studied? Scholars from different disciplines have studied and approached it from different angles, and the different approaches seem to have influenced each other. The terms intercultural and cross-cultural are used sometimes quite closely and even interchangeably. How some social scientists use the two terms are often different from how the terms

have been used in the history of Christianity, especially in mission history.

1. Communication theorists and social scientists approached intercultural hermeneutics as a social-cultural study of meanings and interpretations. A good example of this approach is the publication of the *Journal of Intercultural Studies* (Routledge). Particular volumes, such as volume 30, no. 3 of 2009, focus on the theme of intercultural hermeneutics.
2. In comparative philosophy, Hans-George Gadamer is one of the most influential scholars whose works have influenced both theologians and philosophers in hermeneutics. Other influential theologians in hermeneutics include David Tracy, Jurgen Habermas, and Paul Ricoeur. Gadamer's influence spans across various theological disciplines including missiology and intercultural studies. Other European and Asian philosophers have also been engaging in intercultural hermeneutics as a comparative philosophy. A good example that combines the works of some European and Asian scholars is the book *Interculturality of Philosophy and Religions*.[7]
3. Among biblical scholars, two groups may now be identified as spurring intercultural approach in their hermeneutics.
    a. The best-known biblical scholars are those employing a postcolonial approach as an intercultural hermeneutic. These are scholars mostly from the non-western worlds who employ a strong criticism of colonialism as a response to western colonial hermeneutics. We will comment on this below.
    b. A few other biblical scholars have also employed intercultural hermeneutics to incorporate varied interpretive voices from different cultural backgrounds. One seminal work, *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible,*[8] is the outcome of a three-year project on intercultural readings of John 4 (Jesus' encounter with Samaritan Woman). The study incorporates readings by non-specialist lay Christians in different cultural settings and scholarly observations and interpretations. More recently, an evangelical group of biblical scholars produced another trailblazing work, *Global Voices*.[9] As the subtitle of the volume *Reading the Bible in the Majority World*, indicates, it is a volume of chapters by biblical scholars who originated mostly from

the majority (or non-western) world, intentionally bringing their distinct viewpoints from their cultural settings.

4. In the fields of theology and missiology, following the works of Hans-George Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas, several scholars have developed "intercultural hermeneutics" theologically and missiologically. In missiology, an impressive work done by Franz Xavier Scheuerer is *Interculturality: A Challenge for the Mission of the Church*.[10] Missiologist-theologian Robert Schreiter, ("Intercultural Hermeneutics: Issues and Prospects" in *The New Catholicity*) has provided a foundational piece on the topic, and an inter-religionist Wesley Ariarajah creatively used intercultural hermeneutics as an approach to study inter-religious encounters.[11]

Among European missiologists, intercultural theology has a long history of association with mission studies. As Werner Ustorf has shown, from the late 1960s, three European scholars Hans Jochen Margull (of Hamburg, Germany), Walter Hollenweger (of Birmingham, UK), and Richard Friedli (Fribourg, Switzerland) have teamed up in employing the term "intercultural theology" to explain the theological dimensions of mission.[12] In 2004-2005, the German Association for Mission Studies, together with "the Religious Studies and Mission Studies" section of the Academic Association for Theology (WGTh) in Germany proposed to supplement "mission studies" with "intercultural theology" saying, "the explanatory term 'intercultural theology' be added to the traditional term 'mission studies' without replacing the name 'mission studies'."[13] Yet, whether to replace "missiology" with intercultural theology has been debated fervently today in Europe.[14]

In using intercultural hermeneutics as an approach in biblical interpretation, we are bound by two principles. The first principle is about maintaining the integrity of the text. To what extent we can claim the objectivity of our interpretation of scriptural texts is a debatable question, but the intention to be objective and to maintain the integrity of the text cannot be compromised. Some scholars who employ hermeneutics of suspicion, especially in connection with the difficulty to be free of subjectivist interpretations of texts in the postmodern discussion, seem to have thrown away even the intention to maintain objectivity. Even if our objectivity is relative, there is no reason to submit to the principle of "anything goes." It is reasonable to admit that our way of understanding and therefore interpretations are influenced by our culture, but that is not to say that we cannot therefore do anything about it. We can yield a great deal of objectivity if we are intentional.

The second principle is about the audience or hearer. While the communicator (or speaker) may be preoccupied with the integrity of the text, the cross-cultural hearer or audience is preoccupied with the impact of the communication. Studies on intercultural communication have shown that the main preoccupation is on identity and how the communication may impact it. Therefore, "intercultural communication is not just about maintaining the integrity of the message [or the text]; it is also about its impact on the hearing community."[15]

Intensive dialogue is necessary to make sure of the appropriateness and effectiveness of communication.[16] As we have said, transmissions of messages in the history of Christian missions have taught us that the impact may be something the communicators do not expect. In intercultural studies, siding with the hearer when there are different meanings of cultural codes, and a lot of dialogue with the hearers to understand these cultural and social codes is crucial. As much as we are concerned with intercultural communication, we should also be concerned with "reception theory in hermeneutics."[17]

Let me conclude with two points of observation on intercultural hermeneutics in the context of globalization as we have discussed. The first, and perhaps the most obvious one, is the need to transition from cross-cultural communication to intercultural hermeneutics. In the history of Christian missionary communication, the term cross-cultural communication or interpretation has been used largely in the context of a one-way communication, namely from a Christian to a non-Christian arena. In the new context we are describing, that kind of one-way communication is no longer possible or practicable. The act of communication and interpretation across cultural boundaries has to be conceived as a two-way or a multiple-way activity, and thus the name "inter-cultural." Ideally, we can think of interpretation and communication as mutual actions between or among people of different cultures. This is not to envision or suggest that every interpretive exercise has to involve more than one person and more than one culture, but rather that interpretation has to be sensitive to cultures and should engage conceptions and viewpoints from other cultural settings.

Secondly, the role of power disparity and the politics of (cultural) identity must also be taken into account in intercultural hermeneutics. I think this is where postcolonial studies have contributed significantly. Beginning in literature studies, the enterprise of postcolonial studies positioned itself to do its studies from the viewpoint of the objects of colonial oppression. Postcolonial studies tend to represent the viewpoints of the colonized communities and offer intellectual resistance.[18] Its power lies in writing from the oppressed viewpoint and to reanalyze the same literature from that location.

Today, scholars in the non-western world have used the postcolonial approach popularly in biblical and theological studies. To these scholars, it is the intercultural hermeneutics of the day. Because of its focus on colonialism, several scholars have also employed the hermeneutics to do historical studies on mission.[19] While it helpfully creates a venue to analyze the texts or historical documents from a particular viewpoint, it also has significant limitations in the way it came to be used. For one, its emphasis on resistance in its *modus operandi* limits the approach from constructive operation. Secondly, as an approach focused on colonialism, it tends to see more colonialism to the extent of creating colonialism where it does not seem to exist. Employed to analyze Christian missions in history, it tends to pick up the negative impression, leaving out the very core of the Gospel's good-news event in the missionary enterprise. Much of postcolonial analyses of missions have missed or dismissed new and vigorous movements of missions in the period some called "postmodern."[20]

While we criticize postcolonialism in stretching its object of studies under the rubric of colonialism and its oppositional stature, postcolonial studies have also taught us some essential elements in intercultural hermeneutics. Hermeneutics cannot escape the problem of power disparity and must face it head-on.

End Notes

[1] Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 30.

[2] This was the story of D. E. Jones, the pioneer Welsh Calvinistic Methodist's pioneer missionary to the Mizos, reported by one of the succeeding missionaries. See J. Merion Lloyd, *On Every High Hill* (Liverpool: Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Mission Office, 1956; Aizawl: The Synod Publication Board, 1984), 24.

[3] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 204-205.

[4] Schreiter, 33.

[5] As Roland Robertson aptly defines globalization as "the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole." *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (Sage Publishing Ltd., 1992), 8.

[6] Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2005), 25.

[7] Gregory D'Souza, OCD, *Interculturality of Philosophy and Religions* (Bangalore: National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1996).

[8] Hans de Wit et al. eds., *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004).

[9] Craig S. Keener, and M. Daniel Carroll R. eds. *Global Voices: Reading the Bible in the Majority World* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2013).

[10] F. X. Scheuerer, *Interculturality: A Challenge for the Mission of the Church* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2001).

[11] S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Intercultural Hermeneutics – A Promise for the Future," *Exchange* 34/2 (2005): 89-101.

[12] Werner Ustorf, "The Cultural Origins of 'Intercultural Theology'," *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 25, 2 (2008): 229-231.

[13] See "Conversation on Mission Studies: Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology and its Relationship to Religious Studies," *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 25, 1 (2008): 104.

[14] For the debate, see Frans Wijsen, "New Wine in Old Wineskin? Intercultural Theology Instead of Missiology," in *Towards an Intercultural Theology: Essays in Honour of J.A.B. Jongeneel*, eds. Martha Frederiks et al. eds., Zoetermeer, the Netherlands: Uitgverij Meinema, 2003), 39-65.

[15] Schreiter, 35.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 36.

[18] See R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2003), p. 4.

[19] For an example, see Marion Grau, *Rethinking Mission in the Postcolony: Salvation, Society, and Subversion* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2011).

[20] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 349-362. The rich and complex "elements of an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm" outlined by Bosch following the postmodern paradigm.